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**Tackling Informational Text** Pages 7-7

## Perspectives / Don't Keep the Good Stuff Secret

Marge Scherer

Preparing to write this column, I asked the *EL* editors what nonfiction they were reading these days—not counting *EL* manuscripts, of course. Amy, an aficionado of the Great Books, was reading *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. Naomi, who recently had a book of her poetry published, was enjoying *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. Lucy, our assistant editor with an MBA, was deep into *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*. And Teresa, who reviews books on her blog, *Shelf Love*, had recently recommended to her readers *Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinction*.

Pretty impressive, I thought. Interesting, too, that for a bunch of mostly English majors, science was their topic of choice. Why? New thinking, great writing was the short answer.

In explaining why he wrote *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, author Bill Bryson has an interesting take on why informative texts have not always been so compelling to students. When he was in school, Bryson notes, a diagram of the Earth in his science textbook intrigued him. According to the caption, in the center of the Earth was a sphere of iron and nickel, which was as hot as the sun. How did that sun get there? he wondered. And if the middle of the earth is so hot, how come our feet aren't burning up? He took that hefty book home to find out. But, unfortunately, the text was not informative text after all.

"It was as if (the writer) wanted to keep the good stuff secret by making all of it soberly unfathomable," Bryson writes. Later, after slogging through many more textbooks in school, he decided, "There seemed to be a mystifying universal conspiracy among textbook authors to make certain the material they dealt with never strayed too near the realm of the mildly interesting."

In this issue of *Educational Leadership*, our authors discuss why the Common Core State Standards emphasize teaching students how to read informational text. [Timothy Shanahan](#) tells us that the primary reasons are to prepare students for the kinds of reading expected in college and the workplace and to restore a balance to students' reading diets. He also convincingly argues that students who read more informational text will end up knowing more about their social and natural world. And as they learn more content, [E. D. Hirsch Jr. and Lisa Hansel](#) explain, students become better and better readers. "The more relevant knowledge you have, the less it matters whether the text is complex," they write.

Still, there are challenges associated with tackling informational texts, not the least the one that Bryson describes: Some informative texts are hard-going, poorly written, or just plain dull. A second challenge is motivating students to read. As [Mary Ehrenworth](#), threatening students with state tests or future tasks is not an effective teaching methodology. "Our job is to instill in students a deep sense of engagement with the intricacies of text ... to rouse

them to see more in the text they read—and to do this in a way that makes them want to read more."

She and the other authors in this issue describe many meaningful ways to get students to want to read more nonfiction and get more out of reading when they do—from exposing students to multiple perspectives (pp. [16](#), [52](#)), teaching questioning techniques (pp. 16, [40](#)), showing students how to annotate text (pp. [34](#), [69](#)), reading aloud to students (pp. [22](#), [28](#)), [making nonfiction the topic](#) of book talks, using the Internet to find compelling pro and con arguments on topics of interest (p. 52 and [online](#)), building a library in the [primary classroom](#), teaching kids how to read graphics (pp. [58](#), [62](#)), and, of course, starting with kids' natural curiosity (p. [74](#), [online](#), and many others).

For those of us who already love to read, reading different genres is fun and eye-opening, but those who haven't yet developed the practice definitely need exposure to the good stuff as well as the skills to delve more deeply into it. Mary Ehrenworth reminds all educators: "You are educating them not for the state test, not for that college class, but for the contributions they'll make to the world. ... You are setting out to transform their ideas about what it means to read."

## KEYWORDS

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